

AN EXPLORATION OF GERSHWIN'S *CONCERTO IN F*  
AND HIS CADENZAS

by

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## Introduction

It is unusual for an important piece such as George Gershwin's *Concerto in F* to have remained so overlooked by classical pianists. Indeed, the work is so seldom performed that, while I myself had known of its existence for several years, I only first heard it under uncanny circumstances, when it was used during the 2010 Winter Olympic! Discussions among my colleagues revealed similar personal experiences: not only was the piece rarely heard in concerts of classical music, but performers generally preferred to learn other concertos over the *Concerto in F*. Within this context, I was curious to find out more about the work.

After studying and performing both Gershwin's *Concerto in F* and Ravel's *Piano Concerto in G*, I was struck by the strong similarities between the two pieces—this also seemed to call for careful scrutiny. Brief research led me to one particular letter from Ravel to Nadia Boulanger in 1931, which further sparked my curiosity:

“Dear friend,

There is a musician here endowed with the most brilliant, most enchanting, and perhaps the most profound talent: George Gershwin. His worldwide success no longer satisfies him, for he is aiming higher. He knows that he lacks the technical means to achieve his goal. In teaching him those means, one might ruin his talent.

Would you have the courage, which I wouldn't dare have, to undertake this awesome responsibility?

I expect to return home in early May, and will come to see you in order to discuss this matter.

In the meantime, I send you my most cordial regards.”

Maurice Ravel<sup>1</sup>

To this day, there has not been extensive research focusing solely on George Gershwin's *Concerto in F* and comparing it to other works in the same genre. The only book to analyze this concerto exclusively and in depth was written in German by Clemens Kühn. The amount of sources regarding the concerto being thus extremely limited, I hope, through this research, to provide more information and insights on the piece, and to stimulate more interest for musicians to perform it in the future.

I will first explore the biographical and stylistic contexts of this piece, followed by the musical connections between Gershwin's concerto and Ravel's; then, thorough analyses of the work and of its cadenzas will be presented. Lastly, after studying the cadenzas and the *Concerto in F* as a whole, I am no longer satisfied with the current practice of playing the cadenzas strictly as written, and chose to compose an alternative cadenza for the second movement. The new cadenza is included at the end of this document.

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Pollack, 119- 120. This was a letter Maurice Ravel sent to Nadia Boulanger. During Ravel's Birthday party, Gershwin asked Ravel for a lesson. Ravel declined the request through an interpreter by saying that “it would probably cause him to write bad ‘Ravel’ and lose his great gift of melody and spontaneity”. However, Ravel personally wrote the recommendation letter above to Nadia Boulanger. In an interview in 1938, Nadia Boulanger said “I had nothing to offer him. He was already quite well known when he came to my house, and I suggested that he was doing all right and should continue. I told him what I could teach him wouldn't help him much...and he agreed. Never have I regretted the outcome. He died famous.” Boulanger added that she turned Gershwin down “because he had a natural musical talent that she wouldn't dare disturb for anything.”

## Chapter 1: George Gershwin's Biographical Background

Gershwin was born on September 26, 1898 to a Russian Jewish family. His parents, Moishe Gershovitz and Rosa Bruskin, immigrated to America, thence changing their names to Morris and Rose Gershwin. They had four children: Ira was the first, followed by George, Arthur and Frances. Ira and George would later become inseparable as song writers, ruling the popular song genre in the 1920s. The Gershwin siblings would grow up learning how to speak Russian and Yiddish. They did not live in poverty, and the family would later own their restaurants and other businesses.

George's path to musical stardom was not a typical one. To begin with, his family did not expect him to learn music. In his own words, "Whatever I know about music, I've wrenched out for myself. I had no parents to stand over me and encourage me in the little tunes that I used to make up. No one ever urged me on by telling me that Mozart was a great composer when he was eleven."<sup>2</sup> When the family acquired a piano in 1910, it was originally meant for Ira. As the oldest son, Ira was the scholar of the family, who read everything he could get his hands on. In contrast, their father was convinced that George would end up being a "bum" because he was very mischievous as a child, stealing food from food carts, setting things on fire, and getting into fist fights<sup>3</sup>. Gershwin credited music for turning him into a good boy. To everyone's surprise, George was the first among his siblings to play the family piano because he had taught himself at his friend's house and in local piano stores. During George's childhood in New York, his father pursued many different occupations such as leather working, shoemaking and a business owner of bakeries and eateries. His family moved up to 28 times. Near one of these work places was a

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<sup>2</sup> Pollack, 8

<sup>3</sup> Pollack, 13



Yiddish theatre. While growing up, George enjoyed Yiddish musical theatre, and it greatly influenced his involvement in theatre music later on.

Gershwin's music career started when he dropped out of high school in 1914. He worked full time as a song "plugger" in Tin Pan Alley, advertising and promoting sheet music by previewing tunes on the piano. From then on, he performed these songs and toured around with them in theatres, stores, and restaurants. His fame slowly grew as he became a Broadway rehearsal pianist in 1917 to focus on operetta and musical comedy. Even though he became a much sought after accompanist, his desire to compose songs was still unfulfilled. It was not until 1918 that he finally was offered a position as a staff composer at Harms Publishing Company to publish his own songs<sup>4</sup>. The next year, his song "Swanee" became a huge hit, bringing him fame and fortune at the age of 21. From that point on, his music career remained at the top of the field for the rest of his life and gave him the luxury to perform mostly his own music. It is safe to say that by the mid-1920s, he and Ira had become Broadway's most indispensable team of composers.

Throughout his life, Gershwin was described as very sociable and charismatic. His peers often said that Gershwin made other people feel that they were important to him. Unfortunately, Gershwin began having hand coordination problems in early 1937, and showed other symptoms of illness such as disturbing mood swings, hallucinations, and abnormal food spills while eating. Initial medical tests did not reveal any physical illness, but his condition got worse until he eventually fell into a coma. By the time he was diagnosed with a brain tumor and had surgery, it was already too late. To everyone's shock, George Gershwin abruptly passed away on July 11,

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<sup>4</sup> Pollack, 91. Gershwin became very frustrated with Remick Company early in his career because the company was unwilling to publish his songs. In 1918, it was Max Dreyfus who offered Gershwin a salaried position as staff composer with Harms publishing company. He would remain with the company throughout his life even after it was sold to Warner Bros.

1937 at the age of 38. One can only wonder how much he could have grown as a composer and what masterpieces he would have produced had he lived longer.

### **Gershwin's Scandalous Private life**

George Gershwin never married. However, he was known to have been romantically involved with several interesting women — among them, Jascha Heifetz's sister Pauline. His most significant relationship was with Katherine Swift, known as "Kay": an accomplished musician and composer whom Gershwin dedicated his songbook to in 1932. Gershwin and Swift first met in April of 1925, shortly before he composed his concerto (May-November 1925). Kay was already married to James Paul Warburg, and her affair with Gershwin was well known.

Another story revolves around Gershwin's alleged illegitimate son, Alan Gershwin (he was originally named Alan Schneider, but changed his surname in 1959 whilst claiming that Gershwin was his father). Many people close to the Gershwin family seemed to acknowledge Alan as his illegitimate son, although there was no DNA testing to settle this claim. According to Alan, his birth was the result of the affair between Gershwin and Margaret Manners, then a married chorus girl.

## Gershwin's Musical Education

Numerous biographies from the mid-1930s to the late 1990s portrayed Gershwin as a composer who knew little about music theory.<sup>5</sup> Some of these comments go back to Gershwin's lifetime. Writing about *Rhapsody in Blue*, the critic Isaac Goldberg argued that Gershwin "knew no more about music theory than could be found in a ten-cent manual."<sup>6</sup> This alleged musical ignorance was promoted by Gershwin himself<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, his habit of seeking lessons from his peers would greatly contribute to it. There were also accounts of Gershwin saying that he bought a theory book before writing his concerto and claiming that he never played serious repertoire when he was a piano student. Later, researches by Howard Pollack and Susan Neimoyer contradicted these assertions, thus making him a very unreliable source of information. It is speculative on whether or not Gershwin deliberately hid his real musical education background as a means to distinguish himself from other composers of the time. Neimoyer, a scholar who tracked down the truth of Gershwin's musical education went as far as saying that Gershwin's portrayal of himself may have been devised as a marketing ploy.<sup>8</sup>

There were also several conflicting remarks about interactions between Gershwin and other composers. One story involves Stravinsky in 1928<sup>9</sup>: When Gershwin approached Stravinsky for a lesson, Stravinsky asked him how much he made. Upon hearing that Gershwin had a higher income, Stravinsky responded, "Perhaps it is I who ought to study under you!"<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Neimoyer, 9

<sup>6</sup> Goldberg, 63

<sup>7</sup> Neimoyer, 10

<sup>8</sup> Neimoyer, 11

<sup>9</sup> Pollack, 121. This event was witnessed by Richard Hammond, who studied with Boulanger and was acquainted with Stravinsky and Gershwin.

<sup>10</sup> Pollack, 121

This story is very questionable, because later on Stravinsky said, “A nice story but I heard it about myself from Ravel before I met Gershwin.”<sup>11</sup>

Adding to these stories were negative opinions from several well established musicians. Leonard Bernstein went as far as to say that despite Gershwin’s obvious gift for melody and he never quite achieved the ability to create “real” compositions of any “serious” weight<sup>12</sup>.

Gershwin’s peer Vernon Duke<sup>13</sup> recalled Prokofiev’s stern verdict of Gershwin: “His piano playing is full of amazing tricks, but the music is amateurish.”<sup>14</sup> Together, all of these opinions have successfully confirmed doubts of Gershwin’s musical background for over 50 years.

It was not until the 2000s that the perception of Gershwin’s musical ignorance slowly began to change. In a biography of Gershwin written by Howard Pollack in 2006, the misconception of Gershwin’s musical education was corrected as follows:

The commonplace notion of Gershwin as naïve or ignorant accordingly exasperated Ira, who pointed out that “George from the age of 13 or 14 never let up in his studies of so-called classical foundations and that by the time he was 30 or so could be considered a musicologist (dreadful word) of the first degree besides being a composer....I can’t recall a period in George’s life when, despite all his musical creativity, he didn’t find time to further his academic studies.”<sup>15</sup>

Despite his claim that he never studied music seriously, Gershwin had extensive classical training with numerous teachers. For example:

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<sup>11</sup> Pollack, 122

<sup>12</sup> Neimoyer, 12

<sup>13</sup> Wyatt, 289. Duke Vernon is the pseudonym used by Vladimir Dukelsky. He and Gershwin studied with Joseph Schillinger. “Gershwin’s friend Duke offers reminiscences that thus contain more authority than anyone else’s regarding the role of Schillinger and his method in Gershwin’s compositional development.”

<sup>14</sup> Duke, 122

<sup>15</sup> Pollack, 135

-He studied piano with Charles Hambitzer from 1913 to 1918.

-He studied theory and composition with Edward Kilenyi from 1915 to 1921.<sup>16</sup>

-He also studied orchestration and counterpoint with Joseph Schillinger.

-He took courses at Columbia University with Rosetter G. Cole on Orchestration and music history in 1921.

-He took theory and composition classes with Rubin Goldmark in 1923 who also taught Aaron Copland.

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<sup>16</sup> Neimoyer, 18. Gershwin's theory workbook shows numerous exercises he did under Kilenyi's tutelage. This workbook can be found in the library of Congress.

## Chapter 2: Compositional Context

### Classical Works and their receptions

Gershwin's piano compositions have always had a mixed reception. While *Rhapsody in Blue* has been his most popular composition, it has not always been viewed as a serious and respectable piece. He apparently intended to compose 24 preludes inspired by Chopin's 24 preludes that fell in the tradition of Chopin and Debussy.<sup>17</sup> However, he managed to publish only three in 1926, respectively in B Flat major, C Sharp minor, and E Flat minor. These preludes are famous American classical pieces influenced by jazz. They were arranged for violin by Jascha Heifetz in 1942, and the transcriptions gained as much success as the original piano version.

Gershwin's *Concerto in F* did not attain immediate critical success in its American premiere, but was better received when performed in Europe. To this day, it has remained a less popular choice than *Rhapsody in Blue* for both performers and audiences. His *Second Rhapsody* and *Variations on "I Got Rhythm"* did not achieve popularity either. Regrettably, Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess* is the only composition universally admired as a serious work of classical music.

### Introduction to the *Concerto in F* and its relationship to *Rhapsody in Blue*

*Rhapsody in Blue* was successfully premiered on February 12, 1924 by Paul Whiteman's band, with Gershwin as the soloist. Its immediate popularity prompted the commission of a full-scale concerto on the next day by Walter Damrosch, the director of the New York Symphony Orchestra. Hence, the *Concerto in F* was composed as a direct result of *Rhapsody in Blue*'s

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<sup>17</sup> Pollack, 28

success. At first, the piece was titled “*New York Concerto*”, but Gershwin eventually replaced it with the more abstract “*Concerto in F*.” When he accepted the commission, Gershwin said, “Many people had thought that the Rhapsody was only a happy accident. Well, I went out, for one thing, to show them that there was plenty more where that had come from.”<sup>18</sup>

Due to them being composed so closely together, background comparisons can be made between *Rhapsody in Blue* and the *Concerto in F*. *Rhapsody in Blue* is a work in one movement, and was originally commissioned for Paul Whiteman’s smaller band. Gershwin received help to orchestrate it from Ferde Grofé<sup>19</sup>. Gershwin composed *Rhapsody in Blue* in the course of only 5 weeks with much of the piano part left unfinished at its premiere. . As for the *Concerto in F*, it is divided into 3 movements. It was his first serious attempt to compose for a full size orchestra all on his own. The whole composition process took about six months. Gershwin began composing for two piano version in May 1925, and the orchestration was completed in November 1925.

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<sup>18</sup> Pollack, 346

<sup>19</sup> Pollack, 296. Ferde Grofé was a composer, arranger and pianist for Whiteman’s band from 1920-1932.

## Stylistic Elements

Gershwin's compositions are reminiscent of jazz and ragtime. His musical language incorporates many folk elements from his time. Some of these characteristics are:

- American popular song forms
- Jazzy pentatonic and octatonic scale
- Stride bass
- Heavily syncopated Charleston rhythm, and complicated polyrhythm
- Chromatic harmony, bitonality, and series of augmented chords
- Abrupt jazz-influenced harmonic changes.

The most unusual aspect in Gershwin's musical language resides in his sudden harmonic changes, which creates an element of surprise for the audience. Modulations happen in half or one step with hardly any preparation. For example, in *Concerto in F*, the third movement opens in G minor (mm. 1–20), and quickly switches to F minor on m. 21. Another unanticipated harmonic change occurs in the second movement when the key suddenly shifts from Db major to D major for 4 bars (mm. 118–122), then shifts back to the original Db major, creating a very surprising effect.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Osgood, 118. Ferde Grofé arranged an American Indian Love song called "*The Waters of Minnetonka*" in 1914. The song contains a section that shortly shifts from A major to Ab major and back to A major. Since Ferde Grofé had collaborated in *Rhapsody in Blue*, he could have influenced Gershwin in this instance.





Figure 2.1: *Concerto in F*, mvt 1, mm. 118-122

Gershwin's way of manipulating temporal effects is one of the most exciting features in his composition. His unique use of rhythm can be traced back to his time as a song plugger and accompanist and is a direct result of his experience with jazz and theatre music. The jazz rhythms in his concerto may start from a regular rhythmic pattern, then suddenly transform into irregularities and syncopation. Some of these rhythmic configurations can be classified as swing, simple dotted rhythms or Charleston rhythm among others.

Here is an example of a Charleston rhythm in his *Concerto in F*. The downbeat is irregularly displaced by the accent of the half beat following the second beat, and made regular again on the fourth beat. A regular 4 beat bar has three accents. In other words, the rhythmic grouping is divided into 3+3+2. The syncopation between the second and third beats creates extra tension in the passage below:



Figure 2.2: *Concerto in F*, mvt 1, mm. 113 –116

In some cases, the third accent can be replaced by a rest as seen below:

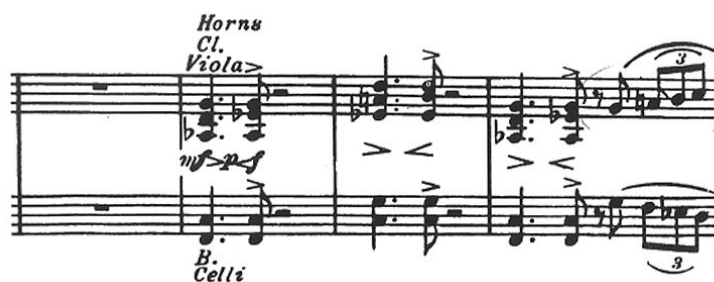


Figure 2.3: *Concerto in F*, mvt 1, mm. 4 –7

In his *Concerto in F*, Gershwin often juxtaposes different rhythmic patterns. Here, the Charleston rhythm, which is described in the previous example, is contrasted by a dotted rhythm:



Figure 2.4: *Concerto in F*, mvt 1, mm. 4 –7

Another unique feature in Gershwin's composition is rhythmic grouping. The diagram below shows rhythmic accents that do not line up with the actual downbeat.<sup>21</sup>



Figure 2.5: Rhythmic grouping

<sup>21</sup>The rhythmic diagram is taken from Henry Levine's "Explanation of the Characteristic Rhythmic Figures in the *Rhapsody in Blue*." This article is the preface of the original score of *Rhapsody in Blue* for two pianos.

This kind of grouping can be found in *Rhapsody in Blue*:



Figure 2.6: *Rhapsody in Blue*, m. 71

In next example, the groupings displace the downbeat, and accelerate the musical gesture at the simultaneously:



Figure 2.7: *Rhapsody in Blue*, mm. 454 –457

Gershwin often mixes the triplets into passages to expand or contract our sense of time. Here is an illustration of how the time is expanded in *Rhapsody in Blue* by placing triplets in the beginning:

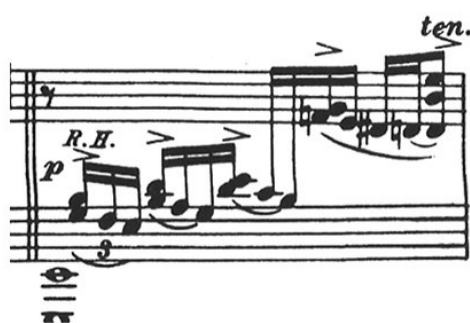


Figure 2.8: *Rhapsody in Blue*, m. 30

The following passage from the *Concerto in F* starts with a dotted eighth note and ends on a triplet. This gives an effect of a progressive rhythmic animation.



Figure 2.9: *Concerto in F*, mvt 1, mm. 414–415

His simple use of dotted rhythms can lead to a “swing” effect where the accents of the third beat are displaced by half a beat:



Figure 2.10: *Concerto in F*, mvt 1, mm. 170–173

In climactic passages, he creates excitement by combining elements he introduced earlier. In this example, a rhythmic grouping is played with the left hand to constantly displace the downbeat while the syncopated Charleston rhythm is played on the right hand. (The brackets below the left hand part show the grouping created by the passage’s contour.)



Figure 2.11: *Concerto in F*, mvt 1, mm. 440–443

## Gershwin's influence on Ravel

As mentioned earlier, Gershwin's habit of asking for lessons from other famous composers was well known. Perhaps this was the reason numerous musicians perceived him as someone who took ideas from other composers without leaving any influence on them. This may not be entirely true because there is strong evidence that Gershwin's concerto influenced Ravel's own concerto in several ways. Gershwin's *Concerto in F* was composed in 1925, and Ravel's *Concerto in G* was composed in 1932 after the two met. Therefore, Ravel could have easily borrowed ideas from Gershwin. This section will focus on some common elements between the two pieces.

The evidence is first seen in the use of the blues motive. Ravel and Gershwin's concertos make distinctive use of this motive in similar ways. The juxtaposition of major and minor (f sharp vs f natural) third within the motive is what gives it the sound of the blues. Here is Gershwin's use of a blues motive in the second movement<sup>22</sup>:

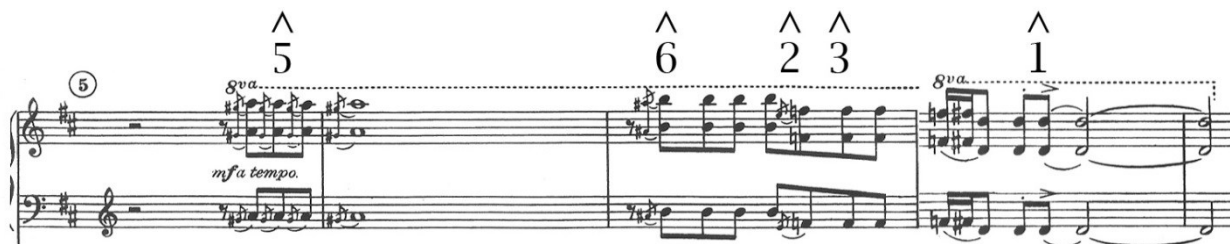


Figure 2.12: Gershwin's *Concerto in F*, mvt 2, mm. 81–85

<sup>22</sup> Ravel greatly admired Jazz music before he met Gershwin. His *Violin Sonata No. 2* was composed between 1923-1927. The second movement was titled "Blues, Moderato." The exact blues motive discussed in this paper does not appear in the Violin Sonata. Thus, the similarity between the piano concerti presents a valid argument of Gershwin's influence on Ravel.

Later on, Ravel slightly altered Gershwin's motive by using the scale degrees 5 – 6 – 3 – 2 – 1 as the main motive in the first movement of his own concerto.



Figure 2.13: Ravel's *Piano Concerto in G*, mvt 1, mm. 127 – 130

While the pianist only seems to play the minor third in the above example, Ravel achieves the same blues effect as Gershwin by letting the left hand play the major third. In the next example, the root is in F sharp. The right hand plays A natural which is the minor third, while the left hand plays A sharp as the major third:

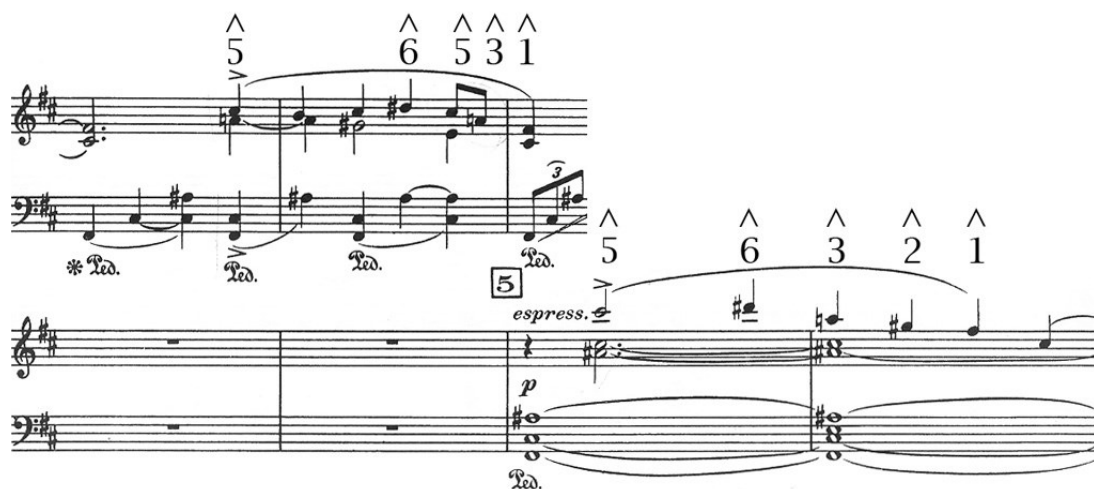


Figure 2.14: Ravel's *Piano Concerto in G*, mvt 1, mm. 50 – 53

Another similarity occurs in the third movement. The meter of Gershwin's third movement is 2/4 and is marked *Allegro Agitato*. Ravel's third movement is also in 2/4, but is marked *Presto*. The rhythmic texture of both movements is similar. They feature repeated and relentless use of sixteenth note figures and contain long passages with rapid alternate hand piano technique:

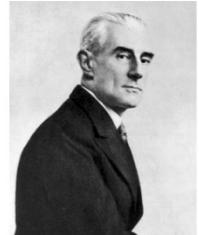
### Gershwin Concerto movement 3

*Allegro Agitato*, 2/4



### Ravel Concerto movement 3

*Presto*, 2/4



L R L R L R L R L R L R



L R L R L R L R repeat...



Figure 2.15: Comparison of the third movements

## Chapter 3: *Concerto in F* Analysis

### Form and Motivic Analysis

Gershwin's writing, within a classical frame, constantly brings us back to the popular genre. Understandably, he was involved with American popular music throughout his life. Gershwin mentioned the pleasant memory of listening to Anton Rubinstein's *Melody in F* from a player piano when he was 6 years old<sup>23</sup>. While the piece belongs to classical genre, its 32 bar AABA structure would later come to be known as the American popular song form. This type of music has 4 main phrases. Each is predictably 8 bars long, and combined for 32 bars. These phrases are usually organized in AABA format, but it is not uncommon to see ABAB or ABAC variant<sup>24</sup>. For example, Gershwin's *I got rhythm* is one of his popular songs organized in AABA format. On the other hand, *Summertime* from the opera *Porgy and Bess* is in ABAC.

A contemporary of Gershwin, Vernon Duke overgeneralizes by establishing a false comparison between the concerto and the American song form. Popular song such as *I Got Rhythm* can be arranged to have an orchestral introduction followed by alternating statements of verse and chorus, and occasionally end with a coda.<sup>25</sup> This format seems to influence his concerto at first because it also has a long orchestral opening and a coda. Furthermore, some sections in the concerto show predictable lengths and alternating phrases through ABAB structure. This could have possibly lead Duke to say that "the themes sounded like 32-bar

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<sup>23</sup> Pollack, 22

<sup>24</sup> While the origin of AABA and ABAB song form can be traced back to traditional Ballad form and quatrain, the author would like to focus in the context of popular music which is what Gershwin was accustomed to.

<sup>25</sup> Pollack, 69



choruses bridged together with neo-Lisztian passages.”<sup>26</sup> In reality, the *Concerto in F* has only a few 32 bar sections, and the structure is much more sophisticated.

There is a vast difference of opinions regarding the actual form of each movement in analyses done by Anthony Charles Lobalbo, John Robert Hanson, Charles Hamm, Steve Gilbert and Christian Martin Schmitz. For example, the first movement is too ambiguous to label. The second movement can be seen either in rondo, or in A B C A form. The third movement may also be a rondo, or viewed as a large A B A' structure. Clemen Kühn went as far as to say that the whole concerto is all loosely in sonata form<sup>27</sup>. Another interpretation of the first and third movements suggests “apotheosis endings”<sup>28</sup>, a formal feature normally present in Romantic works such as Chopin’s ballades and Liszt’s symphonic poems. These numerous viewpoints have made it impossible to find a conclusive formal analysis of this concerto.

It is difficult to label and identify all of the sections through traditional means. For example, each section in the first movement is defined by thematic material rather than harmonic progressions. Clemen Kühn’s analyses rely heavily on a method based on “Motivisch-Thematische Gestalten” (MTG). This terminology is often used by German music theorists in modern music. There is no straight forward translation of this terminology in English, but it is acceptable to understand MTG as Motivic/thematic grouping<sup>29</sup>. I find this method extremely useful to identify different sections in this piece. Thus, this document will utilize MTG in locations deemed appropriate to discuss the concerto’s most interesting formal aspects.

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<sup>26</sup> Duke, 121

<sup>27</sup> Kühn, 323

<sup>28</sup> Gauldin, 20. “The secondary theme of the initial movement in George Gershwin’s *Concerto in F* later recurs cyclically as the first episode of the finale’s rondo-like construct.” “While its climactic restatement near the end of the work in mm. 345-60 closely resembles apotheosis procedure, I suspect in this case that its origin may be traced to the custom of reprising a hit-song toward the end of the production in Broadway musicals.”

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Mead, Email message to author, February 16, 2016

### **Movement 1**

The concerto opens with a long introduction from the orchestra. This is significant for two reasons. First, it is a direct reference to American theatre music which often includes prominent tympani openings. Secondly, the long introduction is the composer's way of reflecting the classical tradition exemplified by Mozart and Beethoven, in which the orchestra plays for an extended period of time while the performer waits for his or her entrance. This is different from some of the most popular concertos composed after Liszt (such as Tchaikovsky's concerti, all of Rachmaninoff's concerti and Ravel's *Concerto in G*) which feature integrated piano parts early on.

This does not mean that Gershwin intended to use standard classical form throughout the concerto. In a typical Mozart concerto, the lengthy orchestral opening signifies a "double exposition" structure in which the orchestra introduces the main thematic material. Then, the soloist enters, repeats, alters, and modulates those materials. While Gershwin's lengthy orchestral introduction can be viewed as his effort to imitate the similar openings of the Classical era, it does not contain the concerto's most important thematic materials as would a typical classical concerto. It is the soloist, not the orchestra, who introduces one of the most important themes. This theme (see figure 3.5) not only underlies the whole first movement, but reappears again in the third movement. Therefore, the role of the soloist is to give this piece the cyclic element and to create thematic unity.

The movement flows quickly through different motives and tonal areas, having no clear perfect authentic cadence until the end. Gershwin keeps on adding new thematic materials late into the movement, which raises questions about the form. Clemen Kühn suggests that the first

movement is an unconventional sonata form. According to his analysis, the theme first introduced by the soloist (Figure 3.5) can be viewed as theme A in the exposition, and its reappearance in m. 366 can function as a recap. His “Motivic/Thematic Grouping (MTG)” analysis also reveals seven MTGs in total. These materials recur in variation to define new sections. Below are the main Motivic/ Thematic Groups in the first movement<sup>30</sup>:

MTG 1: The “Broadway musical Tympani opening”- This passage consists mainly of leaping 8-5-1-8.



Figure 3.1: Gershwin's *Concerto in F*, mvt 1, mm. 1 –4

MTG 2: The “Charleston motive”- It is initially introduced as part of a dialogue between MTG1.



Figure 3.2: *Concerto in F*, mvt 1, mm. 5 –8

<sup>30</sup> Kühn, 273-279

MTG 3: The “Ascending and descending pentatonic scale”- While this can simply be viewed as an arpeggiated seventh chord, it is actually a pentatonic scale that omits the note of A. This is proven by the motive’s reappearance in mm. 307 containing a complete pentatonic scale. It is also more energetic with added blue notes.



Figure 3.3: *Concerto in F*, mvt 1, mm. 9–12



Figure 3.4: *Concerto in F*, mvt 1, mm. 307–310

MTG 4: “Syncopated Repeated notes with chromatic harmony”- This motivic group is first introduced by the soloist (m51) and can be viewed as the main theme of the movement. The piano solo is one of the few sections which has a strong resemblance to the American song form of ABAB variant. It has a 4 phrase ABAB structure, but the B phrases have irregular lengths (8-12-8-10). The significance of this MTG lies in the fact that it not only appears near the end of the first movement, but also appears in a similar fashion near the end of the third movement. Therefore, it functions as a motive that ties the whole piece together. According to Kühn, the complexity of chromatic passing harmony and bitonality of this passage shows that Gershwin was influenced by Alban Berg and Arnold Schoenberg.

④ SOLO PIANO  
Poco meno mosso ( $\text{♩} = 104$ )

Figure 3.5: *Concerto in F*, mvt 1, mm. 51–67

The grand reappearance of MTG 4 in the first and third movement:

Tempo I  
Grandioso

Figure 3.6: *Concerto in F*, mvt 1, mm. 366–373

and mvt 3, mm. 346–353

MTG 5: “Blues theme” - The blues theme is first introduced in m73 and is first seen accompanying MTG 4. The descending notes of E, D, D flat, C are embellished by skipping octaves and are first played by English horn, viola, and contrabass. This is a motive that Gershwin used earlier in his *Rhapsody in Blue* where it is transposed by a half step in m. 17.



Figure 3.7: *Concerto in F*, mvt 1, mm. 73 –79

MTG 6: “Accelerated rhythm on three descending notes”- This rhythmic figure starts with a dotted quarter note before moving on to groups of eighth notes and is followed by a triplet. This motive is played by oboe and clarinet. Curiously, the three descending notes of Bb, A, G are similar to the blue note motive that is found in *Rhapsody in Blue* (mm. 91–94).



Figure 3.8: *Concerto in F*, mvt 1, mm. 95 –98

MTG 7: “The E Major theme”- It is very difficult to find a suitable label for this motive, let alone a key signature. On the surface, the melody of the first two bars is based on three descending notes which loosely relate to the melodic contour of MTG 6. The second half of the theme (m. 232) also contains the accelerated rhythmic figures of MTG 6. But it is important to note that the melodic contour and the rhythmic figures do not happen simultaneously as in MTG 6.

The character of MTG 7 also sets it apart from the rest of the piece because it is the only section that is marked “Moderato cantabile.” It is also the most calm and sentimental section because it does not rush and hurry to the next as others do. In addition, this section is one of the most lyrical in this entire concerto. There are two other curious facts about MTG 7. It is the only section in this movement that is exactly 32 bars long, and the phase lengths are symmetrical (8-8-8-8). But it is not in AABA. Instead, it is ABAB’ which is a variant of the American song form. Finally, the character of MTG 7 not only perfectly matches the “Andantino moderato con espressione” from *Rhapsody in Blue*, but also shares the same key. While these pieces don’t have the same harmonic progression, it is apparent that Gershwin chose E major in both pieces whenever the music calls for dramatic lyricism and sentiment. While MTG 7 reappears again in m. 321, the same character and tonality never appear again, which makes these 32 bars particularly unique in this piece.



Figure 3.9: *Concerto in F*, mvt 1, mm. 224–239

Due to the sheer abundance of motivic/thematic groups, it is difficult to pinpoint specific sections of this movement. This is further complicated by many sections that are transitional and

sequential. Clemens Kuhn, Steve Gilbert and John Robert Hanson agree that this movement is essentially in sonata form because the reprise begins at m. 366 when MTG4 returns. However, there is no clear beginning to the development or the end to the exposition. Gilbert seems to think that the development starts at m. 144 when the cadenza finishes, and the new tonality of F major is established. However, Kühn makes a valid point that Gershwin continues adding new material past that point and raises the question whether the development begins after MTG 7 has finished at m. 256. I would venture to say that the definite starting location of the development does not play such an important role in interpreting and performing this movement: the crucial element of this movement seems to lie, rather, in the presence of the seven MTGs, and in how these return to define new sections.



Movement 1: Modified Sonata form and MTG's first appearance

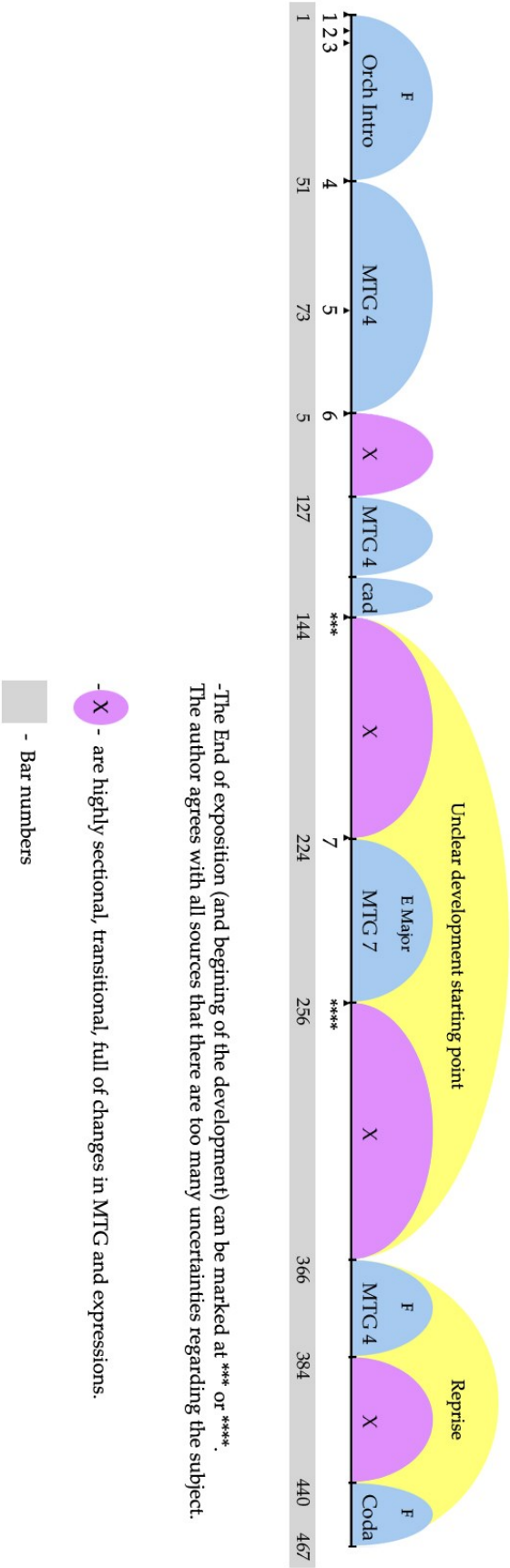


Figure 3.10: *Concerto in F*, Movement 1 Form

## Movement 2

As in the first movement, the form of the second movement is not clear. But unlike the first, which is defined by its fast pace and constant motivic changes, the second movement is more grounded. The movement bears a strong resemblance to blues music right from the beginning. For example, a part of the orchestral introduction (Mm. 4–15) is essentially a 12-bar blues section in both length and harmonic progression.<sup>31</sup> The orchestration of this movement features unique colors that highlight solo instruments such as trumpet and violin. The harmonic progression can also come across as sounding like improvisation. First, the orchestral introduction establishes the key of D flat major. Then, the improvisational aspect grows more apparent as the piano joins, and the harmony becomes increasingly unstable. The movement shifts into a new section in E major and eventually finishes with the piano repeating the orchestra's opening.

Opinions on the form of this movement vary greatly. Some claim it is a rondo with theme A appearing in m. 1, m. 111, and m. 211. According to this interpretation, the form would be A B A C A. This opinion is shared by John Robert Hanson, Charles Hamm, and Steve Gilbert. But on close inspection, there are many characteristics not commonly seen in a traditional rondo form. Kühn has a different opinion by pointing out that this movement is loosely in sonata form and has a total of three themes.

While I agree with Kühn that there are three main themes that form the structure of this movement, I am not convinced that it is in sonata form because the appearance of theme A as a

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<sup>31</sup> The harmonic progression is I<sup>7</sup>-I<sup>7</sup>-I<sup>7</sup>-I<sup>7</sup>-IV<sup>7</sup>-IV<sup>7</sup>-I<sup>7</sup>-I<sup>7</sup>-V<sup>7</sup>-V<sup>7</sup>-I<sup>7</sup>-I<sup>7</sup>

coda is too brief to consider it also functioning as a recap. All of the materials in the second movement can be derived from these three themes:

1. Slow “up-down-up” stepwise harmony:



Figure 3.11: *Concerto in F*, mvt 2, mm. 221–223

2. Repeated blues notes (discussed previously):



Figure 3.12: *Concerto in F*, mvt 2, mm. 81–85

3. E Major Theme (not to be confused with the first movement). This is also a motive that appeared at the beginning of his opera, *Porgy and Bess*.



Figure 3.13: *Concerto in F*, mvt 2, mm. 141–148

To determine the second movement's form, I decided to analyze both its tonal area and thematic aspects. The tonal area has played a more significant role in this analysis when comparing to the first movement. This is possible because there are not a lot of abrupt harmonic and thematic changes.

I agree with Charles Martin Schmidt that the structure of the piece is divided into A (D flat major), and B (E major): A – Cadenza – B – Coda. The orchestra opens the movement with the first theme in D flat major. The piano joins in with the second theme in D flat major. With the exception of some modulations and places that are less harmonically stable, the movement remains in D flat major from mm. 1 to 122. The tonality is destabilized in m. 123 when the piano solo begins. This instability eventually leads to a short cadenza that lasts until m. 141 and functions as a slow modulation to E major. The last section of E major continues from m. 141 to the end and primarily features the third theme. The movement closes with a coda where the piano repeats theme A. In my opinion, this analysis not only contains all the important points of the movement stated above, but it also factors in the significance of the piano solos and cadenza which have mostly been overlooked by performers. The cadenza will be further explored in the next chapter of this document.

Movement 2: A - Cadenza - B - Coda

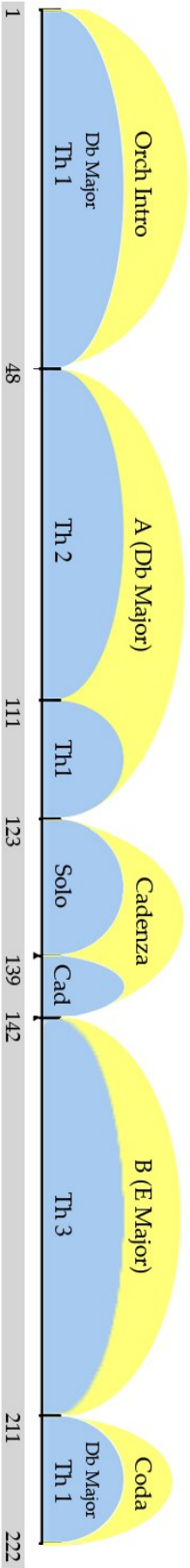


Figure 3.14: *Concerto in F*, Movement 2 Form

### Movement 3

The origin of the third movement is very ambiguous. Was the repeated note motive derived from the first and second movements? While that is certainly possible, a sketch for a prelude in G minor dating from January 1925 contains material almost identical to the third movement of the *Concerto in F*<sup>32</sup>. Gershwin intended this sketch to be included in a collection of 24 preludes which was never completed. Due to the similarity between this sketched G minor prelude and the concerto, the publisher decided not to print this particular prelude. At the beginning of the third movement, it is interesting to observe Gershwin establishes theme A with the orchestra playing the “wrong key” in G minor briefly before settling on F minor. One can only speculate if the opening in G minor is Gershwin’s direct reference to his unpublished prelude.

There are several viewpoints regarding the form of the first and second movements. The third movement, however, seems to be a very straightforward rondo at first glance because the beginning theme appears and alternates with other themes throughout the piece. This can be viewed as another of Gershwin’s attempts to pay homage to the classical piano concerto where the third movement is often in rondo form. While the whole third movement of this concerto is extremely fast paced, each of its themes can be easily differentiated. The piece ends with a coda inspired by the ending of the first movement.

Despite its simple appearance, this movement is more intricate than a typical rondo of A B A C A form. This is due to Gershwin’s usage of Theme A and Theme C. Theme A is shortened each time it reappears in the first half. Depending on how it is viewed, theme A may

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<sup>32</sup> Kühn, 229-231

occur anywhere from 5 to 7 times, and two of its appearances function as small transitional motivic materials rather than real thematic statements. Theme C reappears 4 times and never functions in the same way. For example, it may stay in the same key throughout, or it may modulate to a new key. It can remain completely intact or be fragmented.

Similar to the first movement, Kühn primarily relied on MTG to analyze the third movement. Personally, I disagree with this method because the third movement actually contains less Motivic/Thematic Groups than the first. The harmonic progression is also not as unpredictable. In order to determine the form of this movement, both harmony and thematic features were examined. The thematic usage can be divided between themes from previous movements and new ones exclusive to the third movement. Their organization and interaction with tonal areas form the main scheme of this movement. With some harmonic analysis based on important cadential points, I was able to conclude that there are two distinct key groups: F and B flat. The key of F (both major and minor) dominates the beginning and the end of the piece while B flat (both major and minor) is in the middle. This basically divides the movement into three main sections.

The first section is mostly dominated by new themes unique to the third movement. But, there is a small exception because the B theme is taken from the first movement's MTG 4. This establishes the notion that Gershwin is gradually importing themes from previous movements to tie the whole piece together. In my opinion, the order of theme appearances within this section strongly follows a typical A-B-A-C-A Rondo form which causes many analyses to label the whole movement as such. There would have been no dispute about the rondo form if this

movement ended with theme A in m. 171, but the first section continues onward with another theme C until m. 205.

Theme A:

Allegro agitato

Piano II

ff

Violas

Oboes

Bassoons

Percussion

Horns

Strings & Wood

Brass

Tuba/Bass

1

Figure 3.15: *Concerto in F*, mvt 3, mm. 1–13

Theme B with the reappearance of the first movement's MTG 4:

4

marcato

f

Horns

Tuba/Bass

Piano II

R.H.

Figure 3.16: *Concerto in F*, mvt 3, mm. 75–82



Theme C:



Figure 3.17: *Concerto in F*, mvt 3, mm. 131 –143

The middle section takes a new turn as it refers back to the second movement. Theme 2 and 3 from the second movement appear in dialogue with theme A, which further magnifies Gershwin's intention to make direct thematic connection with the past movements. In my opinion, theme A's appearance (m. 205) functions as a very short transitional passage, and it only appears as a full thematic statement once in the middle of this section (m. 257).

Finally, the last section reverses the thematic usage of the first section. It concentrates mostly on ideas from the first movement rather than the third. The transition to this last section occurs on m. 309 as the Charleston rhythm on the left hand juxtaposes with theme C on the right hand. Then at m. 319, the soloist plays the exact Charleston passage taken from mm.113–116 of the first movement. This section becomes an amalgamation of MTGs taken from the first movement with the small exception of theme A interjecting briefly near the end (m. 362).

In summary, my analysis of the third movement is as follows: 1. The first section introduces new themes, the middle section focuses on the second movement, and the last section refers back to the first movement. 2. Theme C (or part of theme C) is the least stable

harmonically and is used as a transition between sections. 3. Theme A may loosely tie all parts together, but it gradually loses its dominance as the movement progresses because the thematic materials gradually shift focus from the third to the first movement. These findings indicate that Gershwin did not merely compose a rondo. As I struggle to find a more suitable label for this movement, I do not think labeling it a rondo would reflect its complexity. Under the guise of a rondo, it seems more fitting to me to call it an Apotheosis form which not only looks back to thematic ideas from the past, but combines them in one final movement.

Movement 3: Apotheosis

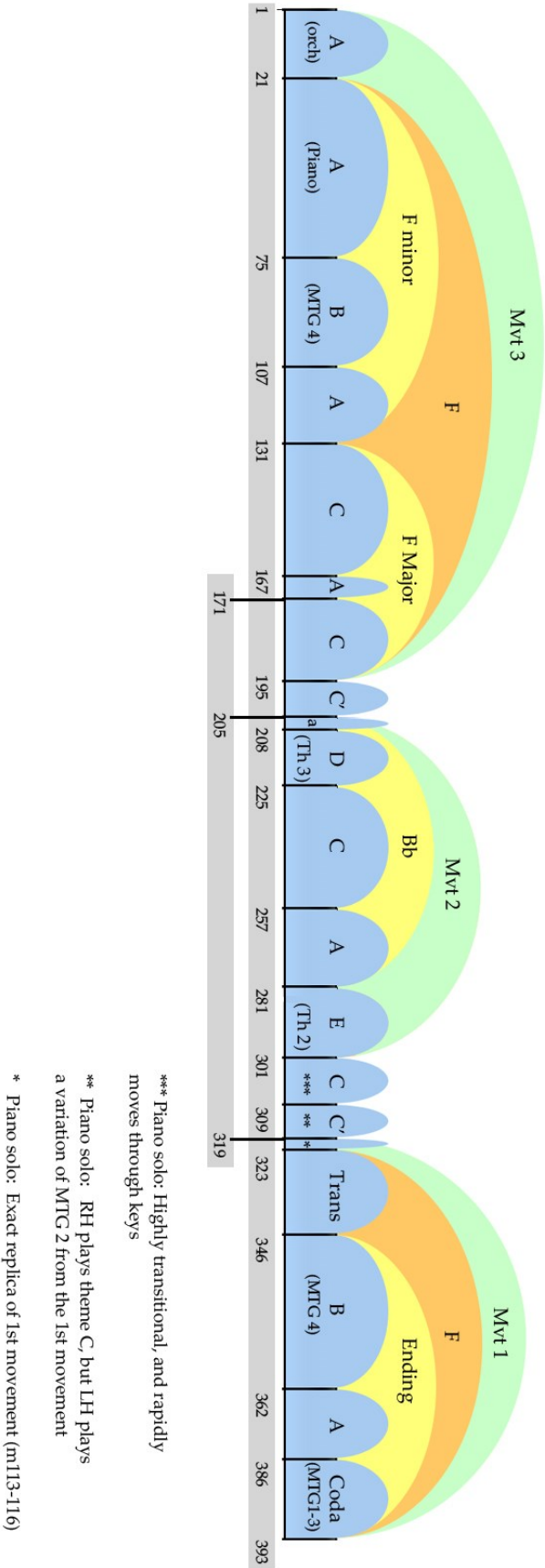


Figure 3.18: *Concerto in F*, Movement 3 Form

## Chapter 4: Cadenzas

### Gershwin's cadenzas

Among all of the unique features of this concerto, Gershwin's cadenzas remain puzzling. In a typical classical piano concerto, the cadenza usually occurs in a climactic fashion right before the closing section of the movement. The practical function of the cadenza is to showcase the soloist's technical and musical brilliance. In addition, it is often acceptable and encouraged for the performer to improvise and compose music for this part. Mozart firmly established this trend and was followed by Beethoven. The practice of composing one's own cadenza becomes less frequent during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But if a cadenza is indicated, it usually appears near the closing section where it is elaborated in considerable length and thoroughly composed such as in Schumann's *Piano Concerto in A minor*, Grieg's *Piano Concerto in A minor* and Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto in B flat minor*. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Rachmaninoff provided two versions of cadenzas in the first movement of his third concerto that are both extremely virtuosic. Ravel's cadenza in his *Concerto in G* goes for an ethereal effect by utilizing nonstop trills that last over one minute. Prokofiev's *Second Concerto* features a complicated cadenza that lasts over five minutes in the first movement. Contrary to the composers mentioned above, the cadenzas in Gershwin's *Concerto in F* and *Rhapsody in Blue* are extremely short. In the case of *Rhapsody in Blue*, it has become universally accepted and encouraged that performers compose their own cadenzas. But why has the cadenza in Gershwin's concerto not been receiving the same treatment as *Rhapsody in Blue*?

While cadenzas may simply refer to any part that the pianist is playing alone, it is important to note that Gershwin went through the trouble of giving different labels for "solo"

sections and “cadenzas”. Gershwin’s cadenzas in this piece do not exactly fit the norm. They do not appear near the end of the movements, nor are they virtuosic. The cadenzas are written in a simple style and are one to two bars long. Gershwin marked two locations “Cadenza” in total.

The first location is at rehearsal 13 (m. 141) in the first movement:

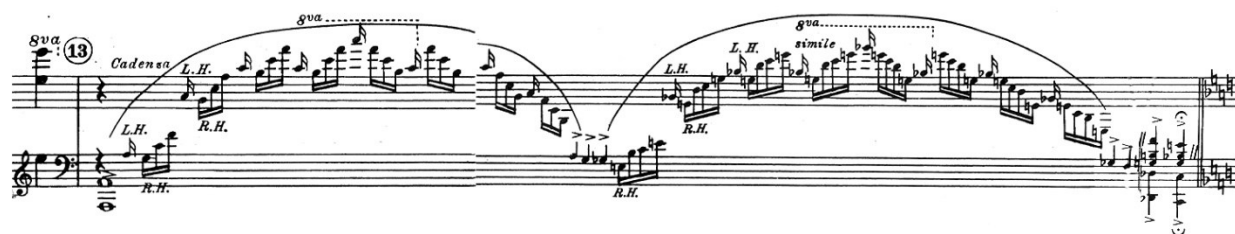


Figure 4.1: *Concerto in F*, mvt 1, m. 141

Here is the cadenza in his second movement:

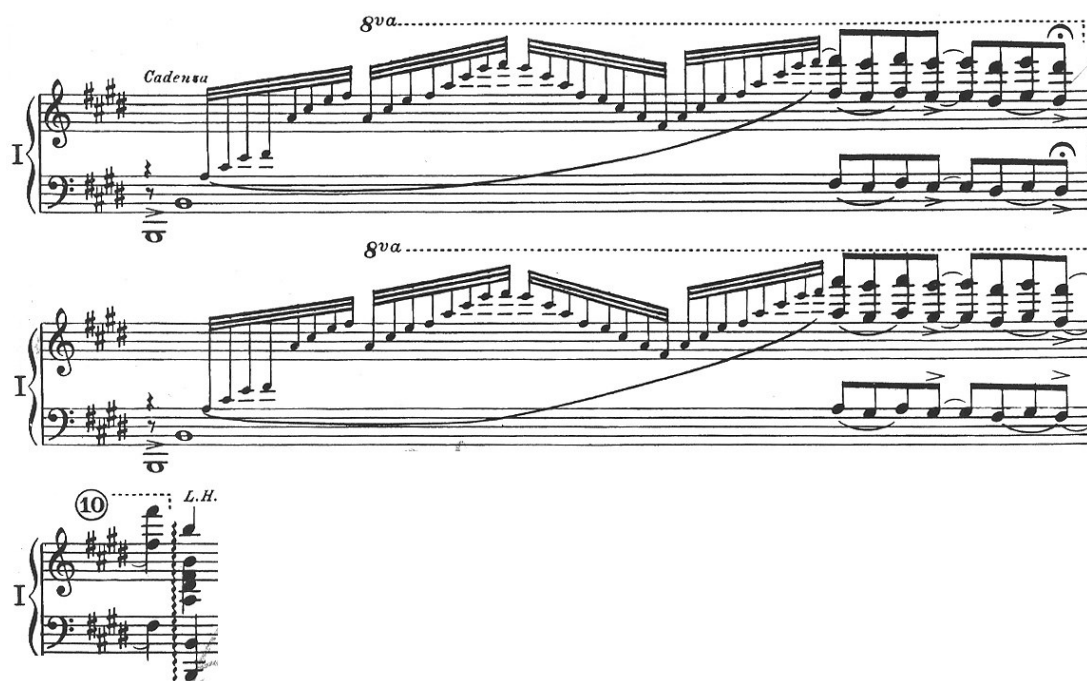


Figure 4.2: *Concerto in F*, mvt 2, mm. 139–141

The following is his cadenza in *Rhapsody in Blue* which is written in similarly short fashion:

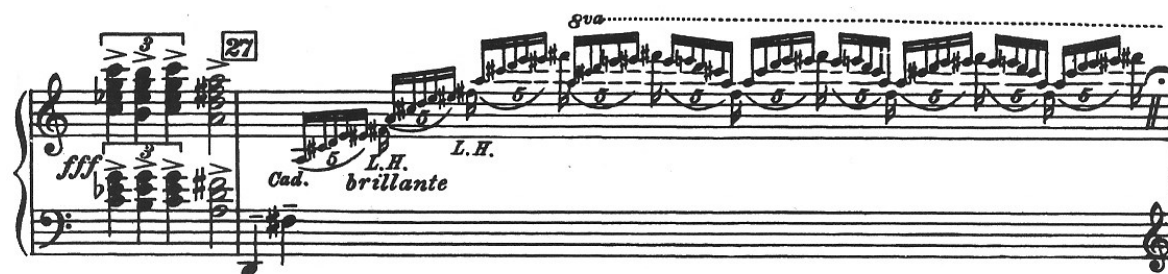


Figure 4.3: *Rhapsody in Blue*, mm. 295–296

Why did he write such short, non-virtuosic cadenzas? In the case of *Rhapsody in Blue*, he did not have time to write them down when he first premiered it because he only had five weeks to prepare. There were several instances where he simply wrote “wait for nod” in the manuscript, allowing the performer freedom to improvise in jazz style. For his concerto, the short and simplified writing could also be Gershwin’s way of looking back to the classical tradition of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and encouraging the performers to create their own cadenzas. Regardless of how much we speculate on whether Gershwin meant for all his cadenzas to be played exactly as written, we may never know the truth because Gershwin never recorded a full performance of his own concerto. His only recording was of the third movement in 1931, during a radio broadcast.<sup>33</sup>

Regardless of Gershwin’s reason for writing such short cadenzas in his concerto, they were all played strictly as written in all of the recordings I have listened to. Another one of Gershwin’s close associates and one of his finest interpreters, Oscar Levant<sup>34</sup>, also played the short cadenza that Gershwin wrote and never tampered with it. To my knowledge, no performer has improvised or composed anything new for this concerto’s cadenzas up until now. This is

<sup>33</sup> Rudy Vallee invited Gershwin to play on NBC Radio Broadcast in 1931. In the same session, he also played a few of his popular songs.

<sup>34</sup> Levant’s rendition of the *Concerto in F* appeared in the movie “An American in Paris” (1951).

surprising for a piece deeply rooted in jazz where a performer's improvisation is standard practice.

What follows are my own speculations of Gershwin's intentions for performers to compose their own cadenzas. The ultimate goal is to provide incentives for musicians to play this concerto:

1. Similar to his other works, this concerto is heavily influenced by jazz. Composing one's own cadenza fits into Gershwin's scheme of fusing the highly improvisatory jazz style with the classical concerto.
2. The length of the parts labeled "cadenzas" in both the first and second movements are short and simple. This is unusual when comparing to longer cadenzas in other concertos.
3. Perhaps Gershwin wanted to go back to the tradition of 18<sup>th</sup> century concertos which encourages performers to write their own versions. Therefore, he deliberately didn't write anything complicated to dictate what performers should do.
4. Figures 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3, show no significant difference between the cadenzas in *Rhapsody in Blue* and the concerto. If it is stylistically encouraged to improvise and compose in *Rhapsody in Blue*, the same treatment should be applied to the cadenzas of the *Concerto in F*.
5. Gershwin clearly labeled sections "solo" and "cadenza", which suggests different treatment.

Based on my speculations above, it is difficult to imagine that Gershwin would not want the performers to improvise in the *Concerto in F*.

### Author's Composition of a New Cadenza

While it is possible to compose new themes in the cadenza, utilizing existing thematic materials is a stronger approach. Ideally, this process would address some of the unusual features of this concerto: the first movement alone contains seven thematic groups, and there are many parts that seem transitional and fragmented. These MTGs never appear in the second movement, but the third movement contains a lot of thematic materials from both earlier movements. Based on this information, there are strong thematic unities between third and earlier movements, but there is no thematic connection between the first and the second movements. The cadenza in the second movement provides an opportunity to establish this missing thematic link.

The original cadenza in the second movement is essentially in the dominant key of E major. This gives a big hint on what can be done thematically. After all, the E major key represents Gershwin's most lyrical and sentimental theme in his *Rhapsody in Blue* (Andantino moderato con espressione). This is strikingly similar to MTG 7 in the concerto's first movement which has the same key and expression. As a performer, these are the moments that give perfect opportunities to show the soloist's artistic side. In *Rhapsody in Blue*, the theme is first played by the orchestra for 22 bars (m. 302). It is repeated again in a grand manner while the pianist plays accompaniment and sets up dialogue with the orchestra for 32 bars. The pianist finally repeats this theme alone at m. 356 and adds 26 more bars. In my opinion, this E major section of 80 bars is the most beautiful moment in *Rhapsody in Blue*.

In the first movement of the *Concerto in F*, MTG 7 could have followed the same formula that made *Rhapsody in Blue* successful as described above. Slight deviation occurs in the beginning

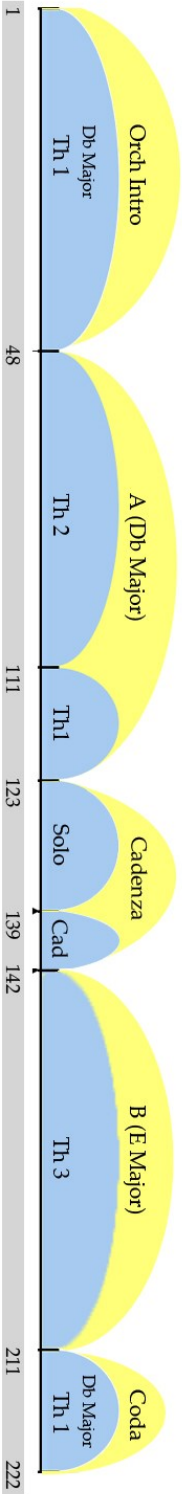


when the orchestra plays the E Major theme while the pianist lightly plays accompaniment (m. 224). Then the theme is repeated by the orchestra again in a grand manner (m. 240). The music in this section gradually intensifies over 32 bars, and builds anticipation for the soloist to make a dramatic statement by repeating the E Major theme. However, Gershwin denies our expectation by moving on to a contrasting section at m. 256. It is puzzling and unfortunate that the soloist never gets to repeat this theme!

In my opinion, the location, tonal area, and character of this second movement's cadenza provide a great opportunity for the pianist to finish the part that was left unsaid from the first movement. Inserting MTG 7 in E major back into the second movement fits Gershwin's practice of establishing thematic unity between each movement. Furthermore, this creates a focal point for the soloist to shine.

Figure 4.4 shows how the new cadenza fits within the second movement. Figure 4.5 shows the new cadenza.

Movement 2 with original cadenza



Movement 2 with new cadenza

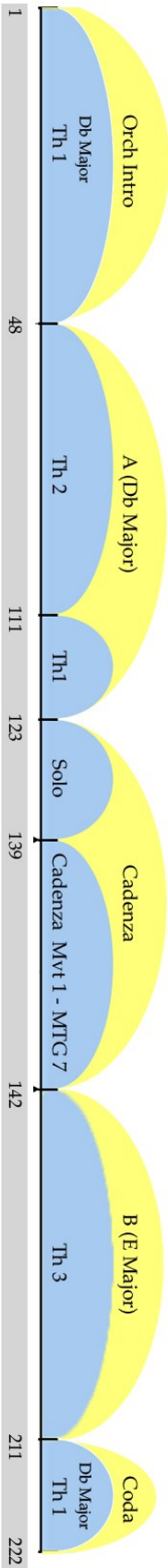


Figure 4.4: *Concerto in F*, Movement 2 Form with new cadenza comparison

Figure 4.5: *Concerto in F*, Cadenza for second movement, composed by Mayta Lerttamrab

The musical score is written for piano and bass. It is in F major (three sharps) and 4/4 time. The score is divided into six systems. The first system begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The second system starts at measure 5. The third system begins at measure 8 with a crescendo (*cresc.*) marking. The fourth system includes a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic and a sixteenth-note triplet in the bass. The fifth system features a triplet in the treble. The sixth system continues the melodic and harmonic development.

14

3

17

*cresc.*

*Con moto*

*f*

20

*decresc.*

23

*mf*

27

*f*

29

31

33

*ff* *mf* *cresc.*

35

*ff*

22

3

37

22

3

Detailed description: This page contains five systems of musical notation for a piano piece. The key signature is D major (two sharps). The first system (measures 29-30) features dense block chords in the right hand and a rhythmic bass line in the left hand. The second system (measures 31-32) continues this texture with some chromatic movement in the bass line. The third system (measures 33-34) introduces a crescendo, with the right hand playing a series of descending block chords and the left hand a steady eighth-note pattern. The fourth system (measures 35-36) is marked *ff* and features a rapid ascending scale in the right hand and a more active bass line. The fifth system (measures 37-38) continues the rapid scale in the right hand and the active bass line. Measure numbers 22 and 3 are indicated below the staves in the fourth and fifth systems respectively.

39

42 *ad lib*

43

8<sup>va</sup>

9

8<sup>va</sup>

9

Detailed description: This image shows a musical score for piano, spanning measures 39 to 43. The score is written for both hands in a grand staff. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#). Measure 39 features a treble staff with a whole note chord and a bass staff with a triplet of eighth notes. Measure 40 continues the triplet in the bass staff. Measure 41 shows a treble staff with a whole note chord and a bass staff with a triplet of eighth notes. Measure 42 is marked 'ad lib' and features a treble staff with a whole note chord and a bass staff with a triplet of eighth notes. Measure 43 features a treble staff with a whole note chord and a bass staff with a triplet of eighth notes. The score includes various musical notations such as treble and bass clefs, key signatures, and dynamic markings.

## Final Words

I have admired Gershwin's *Concerto in F* since I first heard it. The piece's thematic unity and its structural organization indicate that Gershwin carefully composed it with his complex and unique approach. What makes it even more significant to me was its influence on Ravel.

Perhaps due to its unusual form, or to the misconception of Gershwin as a somewhat amateurish composer in terms of classical music, the *Concerto in F* has, to my regret, long been overlooked in the standard piano repertoire. However, as seen throughout our previous analysis of the work, Gershwin's *Concerto in F* not only possesses a rich musical potential, but it also provides, through its cadenzas in the first and second movements, rare opportunities for performers to improvise, whilst incorporating jazz elements.

The freedom to improvise is scarce in classical music where compositions are usually performed explicitly as written. It is an extraordinary circumstance to contribute new cadenzas to a masterpiece without fear of comparison to existing versions. I seized this chance to compose a new cadenza for the second movement and enjoyed every minute of the creative process. I would be very honored if musicians would perform my work, and I sincerely hope that it will inspire other performers to take the liberty of composing more cadenzas in the future.

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